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Commission on the Status of Women
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Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Advocates for Youth, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. We congratulate the Commission on the Status of Women on its fifty-fifth session for choosing to discuss the issue of access and participation of women and girls in education, training, and science and technology, including the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work.

2. The areas of education and employment hold particular relevance for young women and girls and we encourage the Commission to pay special attention to the age-specific aspects of these issues in its deliberations.

3. In 2007, only 53 of the 171 countries with available data had achieved gender parity in both primary and secondary education, and an estimated 53 million school-age girls were not enrolled in primary schools.

4. The prospects for a girl's education decrease considerably if she lives among the poorest 20 per cent of households. A poor girl is four times less likely to attend school than a boy living among the wealthiest households. Opportunities for such a girl to attend secondary school are even narrower, not to mention the limited opportunities for post-secondary education.

5. Increased efforts are needed to ensure that girls of all ages remain in school, including the provision of comprehensive education on life skills, human sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, and increased funding and budgeting for educational services, including those that work to increase the attendance of younger women and girls in primary and secondary education.

6. Investing in young girls' education also contributes to the increased opportunity for productive employment. Currently, young people are most affected by unemployment; the International Labour Organization reported in 2010 that they are 2.68 times more likely than adults to be unemployed. Youth unemployment has reached a record high of 82.7 million youth globally. Among those youth who are employed, 152 million still live in extreme poverty, as they are badly paid, have insecure and unsafe jobs and lack access to adequate education and training. Therefore, initiatives addressing unemployment should focus on young people.

7. There must also be increased attention towards preventing early child marriage, as this practice violates girls' rights to pursue education and employment and attain a high standard of physical and mental health, and prevents them from achieving their highest potential. Child marriage decreases girls' ability to negotiate condom use, delay childbearing and prevent contracting sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. This practice is a consequence of and contributes further to gender inequality.

8. In addition, there must be increased attention towards equipping young women with the information, skills and tools that they need to prevent unintended pregnancy. Pregnancy and childbirth-related complications are the leading cause of death for young women aged 15-19. Increased access to comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services, including contraceptives, will enable girls and young women to stay in school longer by preventing unwanted pregnancy, early childbearing, related morbidity and mortality, and sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Access to safe abortion and post-abortion care

* Issued without formal editing.

in case of unintended and unwanted pregnancies will also help them to stay in school longer. A comprehensive package of affordable, accessible, acceptable, and quality sexual and reproductive health services should be put in place to ensure that girls and young women do not die from pregnancy and childbirth-related complications and thereby are able to become productive members of their communities.

9. In summary, we request that the Commission emphasize in its conclusions the need for Governments to respect, protect, promote and fulfil:

(a) The right of girls and young women to participate and make free, informed decisions in all aspects of their lives, including in economic, labour, family and community spheres;

(b) The right of girls and young women to receive adequate and accurate information and education that enables them to lead healthy and productive lives;

(c) The right of girls and young women who are pregnant, mothers and/or HIV-positive to continue their education or employment;

(d) The right of girls and young women to have access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, including an adequate supply and diversity of contraceptives, safe abortion, and tailored services for girls and young women living with HIV;

(e) The right of girls and young women to be free from early and forced marriage and all forms of violence and discrimination, to be educated and healthy, and contribute to the labour force in their communities and countries;

(f) The right of girls and young women to participate in decision-making and policy formulation at all levels, including those that affect their lives;

(g) The achievement of gender equality including through public education initiatives and law enforcement, to reduce inequality in education (including securing equal enrolment rates and reducing dropout rates), employment (including eliminating differences in wages paid to women and men and securing an equal number of women in senior management positions) and family life (including ensuring the equal right to inheritance, and protection from all forms of violence and discrimination, including rape within marriage);

(h) The right of women to decent work and a good working environment (with proper compensation, working conditions, and protection from environmental harm).

10. Action should be taken to revise existing discriminatory laws or policies and those that limit the participation of girls and women, including access to sexual and reproductive health services and life-skills programmes.

11. We also request the Commission to encourage the newly formed UN-Women, the United Nations entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women, to prioritize all of the above issues and to ensure that the perspectives of girls and young women are fully integrated in their work.